

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4125
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
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S/AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE 5993

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE KUALA LUMPUR 4366

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, MY
SUBJECT: HIGHWAY ROBBERY

1. SUMMARY. A RECENT SPATE OF HIGHWAY ROBBERIES ON THE MAIN NORTH-SOUTH TRUNK ROAD IN JOHORE HAS CAUSED CONCERN IN SINGAPORE BUT HAS BEEN LARGELY IGNORED IN THE MALAYSIAN PRESS. IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONING BY THE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION, THE GOM HAS FINALLY ACKNOWLEDGED THE ROBBERIES, BUT HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER GHAZALI'S ATTEMPT FIRST TO IGNORE AND THEN TO DENY THE EXISTENCE OF A PROBLEM HAS NOT HELPED GOM CREDIBILITY. END SUMMARY.

2. RECENT CONTACTS BETWEEN OFFICERS OF EMBASSIES KUALA LUMPUR AND SINGAPORE HAVE REVEALED TO US THAT IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS A NUMBER OF TRAVELERS ON THE MAIN NORTH-SOUTH TRUNK ROAD FROM SINGAPORE TO KUALA LUMPUR HAVE BEEN BESET BY HIGHWAY ROBBERS IN JOHORE. APPARENTLY THE VICTIMS HAVE GENERALLY BEEN NON-MALAYSIANS (MOSTLY SINGAPOREANS). THESE ROBBERIES HAVE RECEIVED EXTENSIVE PUBLICITY IN THE SINGAPORE PRESS AND HAVE CAUSED SOME FOREIGNERS IN SINGAPORE TO CANCEL PLANS TO DRIVE THROUGH MALAYSIA, BUT THEY HAVE BEEN GENERALLY IGNORED BY THE MALAYSIAN PAPERS UNTIL JULY 28.

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3. REPORTING ON THE JULY 28 PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE, THE

JULY 29 "NEW STRAITS TIMES" CARRIED A STATEMENT BY HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER GHAZALI SHAFIE THAT MALAYSIAN POLICE HAVE "CRIPPLED" THREE OF THE FOUR HIGHWAY ROBBERY GANGS OPERATING ALONG THE TRUNK ROAD IN JOHORE AND HAVE "SMASHED" A FOURTH. CLOSER SCRUTINY OF GHAZALI'S STATEMENT, HOWEVER, SHOWS THAT THE THREE "CRIPPLED" GANGS WERE ALL DISRUPTED BEFORE APRIL OF THIS YEAR, ONE IN 1974. THE CURRENT SPATE OF ROBBERIES ONLY BEGAN IN EARLY JUNE AND THE "SMASHING" OF THE FOURTH GANG MEANS THAT THE POLICE HAVE INTENSIFIED THEIR EFFORTS, THAT THEY HAVE IDENTIFIED SOME MEMBERS OF THE GANG AND THAT THEY "ARE ONLY WAITING FOR THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO NAB THEM."

4. GHAZALI'S REMARKS CAME IN REPLY TO A QUESTION IN PARLIAMENT BY AN OPPOSITION MP ABOUT INCREASING ROBBERIES ALONG THE JOHORE-SINGAPORE HIGHWAY. ACCORDING TO THE NST REPORT, GHAZALI HAD FIRST REPLIED THAT THERE WERE NO HIGHWAY ROBBERIES ALONG THE JOHORE-SINGAPORE HIGHWAY; HE LATER "EXPLAINED" HIMSELF: "I REPLIED AS SUCH BECAUSE THE JOHORE-SINGAPORE ROAD MEANS THE CAUSEWAY. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT THERE ARE NO ROBBERIES ALONG THE CAUSEWAY."

5. COMMENT: THE OBVIOUS ATTEMPT TO KEEP WORD OF THE ROBBERIES OUT OF THE LOCAL PRESS WHEN THEY ARE FRONT PAGE NEWS IN SINGAPORE, GHAZALI'S EXAGGERATION OF THE MEASURES BEING TAKEN BY THE POLICE AND HIS FLIPPANT ATTITUDE ARE ALL TYPICAL OF THE HOME MINISTER'S APPROACH TO HANDLING POTENTIALLY EMBARRASSING MATTERS CONNECTED WITH HIS MINISTRY. THIS APPROACH DOES NOTHING TO HELP THE GOVERNMENT'S CREDIBILITY.
UNDERHILL

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